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Electronic sound in post-war Japan: creation, consumption, representations

I work on music and sound in contemporary Japan. For my PhD dissertation, which I completed few years ago, I worked on the beginnings of electroacoustic music in Japan – electroacoustic music being a form of music whose one of its characteristics is that it uses recorded sound as its material.

This work consisted in analysing the production of Japanese electroacoustic music from the 1950s to the 1970s through the intellectual exchanges and the media transfers that took place between the Japanese composers and the European and American composers involved.

According to the definition proposed by Leigh Landy¹, electroacoustic music is music in which electricity is used not only to record and amplify sound, but also to create the musical material.

Electroacoustic music thus has more to do with the question of means and material than with the question of stylistic traits. Although in electroacoustic music the sound material is recorded sound, it can be of two types: microphonic, that is to say picked up by a microphone,

¹ LANDY Leigh, "Electroacoustic Music Studies and Accepted Terminology: You Can't Have One Without the Other", *EMS06*, Beijing, October 2006.
<http://www.ems-network.org/IMG/EMS06-LLandy.pdf>

or electronic, that is to say synthesised. Each of these two types has a profound influence on the way in which this sound material is developed and on the understanding of the sound.

It's important to note that although electronic sound has been around since the 1920s with instruments such as the theremin, electroacoustic music marks the first time in history that electronic sound has been conceived as entirely controllable thanks to the radio studio devices that were developed after the Second World War.

In the continuation of my previous work, I would next like to look at representations of electronic sound in Japan. This research project will look specifically at the evolution of representations of electronic sound as it became a commodity in the 1970s.

I haven't actually started this research yet. However, in today's paper, I will present some questions that form the starting point of my reflections. These questions concern, on the one hand, the ways in which electronic sound is perceived in the continuation of microphonic sound in the context of the creation of electroacoustic music and, on the other hand, the ways in which electronic sound is perceived in the context of its widespread dissemination in society.

I'll start by talking about microphonic sound and *musique concrète*, the type of music in which microphonic sound first played a major role in musical creation.

As Michel Chion has noted², sound as experienced in everyday life is reframed and transformed through recording and through the application of electric effects in the case of *musique concrète* creation. In this way, recorded sound of microphonic origin constitutes a platform of interaction between sound as it is first experienced within the sensory reality and sound as an element of the musical work.

² CHION Michel, *La Musique concrète, art des sons fixés*, Lyon, Éditions Môméludies, coll. "Entre-deux", 2009 (1st ed. 1991).

In 1948, as part of the process of conceptualising so-called “musique concrète”, the French composer Pierre Schaeffer proposed³ a new compositional practice based on the preparatory stage of sound study. For Schaeffer, where traditionally the act of composing music began with a writing process detached from actual listening to sound, *musique concrète* was intended to place listening to sound at the very heart of the compositional process.

The constitution and organisation of the sound material thus involved a back-and-forth movement between manipulating the objects that generated the sound and listening to the sound resulting from this manipulation, all the while tending towards the sound desired in the perspective of the musical work.

To ensure that this compositional process leads to music⁴, Schaeffer advocated what he called “reduced” listening to sounds, that is to say listening oriented towards appreciating the very quality of sounds, and not towards interpreting the meaning of these sounds. In other words, reduced listening consisted in mentally detaching sounds from their cause.

For most avant-garde composers in Japan, *musique concrète* offered a privileged space for thinking sound. In this way, Japanese composers had responded to Schaeffer's conception of microphonic sound by returning the listening of sound to the collective sensory and affective experience of everyday life. The method was absolutely different from what Schaeffer was proposing.

One example of this is the work *Myūjikku konkurēto no tame no sakuhin X.Y.Z*, produced by composer Mayuzumi Toshirô in 1953. In the first part of this work, one can hear sounds of industrial origin, such as artillery fire and airplanes in flight. Actually these sounds

³ SCHAEFFER Pierre, *À la recherche d'une musique concrète*, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 1952.

⁴ *Id.* in *L'œuvre musicale. Textes et documents inédits réunis par François Bayle*, Paris, INA.GRM / Librairie Séguier, 1990, p. 30.

had the obvious aim of recalling the war. This brings back the tragedy of history, whose imprint was then determining in its entirety the movement of post-war Japanese society⁵.

Another example is Takemitsu Tôru's music. In Takemitsu's work, *musique concrète* is not a place of sound accumulation, but a place of hollowing out of sound. This can be heard, for example, in the work *Mizu no kyoku* (1960). In this piece, the sounds that remain after a process of selection by subtraction emerge from silence and return to it, responding to each other. According to Takemitsu, composing means making an exchange, returning to the world the perceptible sound material after having subjectively experienced it.

We see that Japanese composers made microphonic sound the expression of a local memory and said “local sensibility”.

But what about electronic sound, which is entirely generated by technology and is not immediately linked to any memory, any sensibility, and any subjective reality?

Another question is how did Japanese composers and audiences embrace electronic sound to connect it to everyday experiences and give it meaning?

I'm now going to talk about how electronic sound was considered in Japan in the context of electronic music, a form of music made up of sounds generated by sine waves.

Mayuzumi Toshirô was the first composer in Japan to create a work of electronic music, in 1955. He studied the German composer Karlheinz Stockhausen's method and wondered how to integrate electronic material into Japanese musical expression.

Because electronic sound had no relationship to any musical tradition, Stockhausen organised it by means of mathematical values linked to the formal structure of the musical work.

⁵ CORRAL Jeremy, *Pratiques et esthétique de la musique pour bande japonaise: le cas du studio de musique électronique de la NHK (1952-1970)*, doctoral thesis directed by LUCKEN Michael and defended at Inalco in 2021.

But Mayuzumi proposed linking the electronic sound to the intuitive dimension of musical development. To put it another way, Mayuzumi suggested that the ways in which electronic sound is produced and organised should be subject to emotion rather than abstract thinking. This led him to compose numerous pieces in which the function of electronic sound was to amplify the sensory intensity of everyday sound events; for example by accentuating the dynamics of these sound events, such as the sound of Buddhist temple bells in for example the piece *Kanpanorōjī orinpika* which has been composed for the Olympic Games held in Tokyo in 1964.

Many composers subsequently developed their own approaches to electronic sound. But although it was new and required special attention, electronic sound was never really considered as a sound cut off from the sensory and emotional experience of everyday life, and therefore it never really represented a sound whose specific characteristics required the invention of specific musical rules.

In this sense, sound of microphonic origin and sound of electronic origin have never been the subject of a systemic theoretical and formal opposition in Japan, as it was first the case in Europe.

Microphonic sound and electronic sound naturally merged to create electroacoustic music that incorporates both.

In the 1950s and 1960s, electroacoustic music attracted a specialised audience, mainly through radio broadcasts of contemporary music.

However, the Japan World Exposition held in 1970 in Osaka marked a new stage in the history of electronic sound, as it was separated from the usual broadcasting networks to take full possession of the space of the event, an event which was thought to embody the structure of a new social order based on the utopia of the horizontality of peoples and individuals. From

then on, electronic sound would be linked to a certain idea of modernity determined by technology, capitalism and consumerism.

As a result of this idea becoming part of the collective imagination, electronic sound, going with the development of popular music industry and the development of video game industry, became a real part of everyday life in the 1970s. It thus became linked to the social activity stimulated by strong economic growth and the individualisation of consumer practices.

In conclusion, my research will further investigate whether the representation of electronic sound in the 1970s, particularly among professional and amateur musicians, is really or isn't really in continuity with earlier forms of representation of this sound, according to which it joins technology with sonic apprehension of everyday life.

What will need to be particularly explored are the intricate mechanisms by which electronic sound and the images associated with it circulate within society and are transformed.